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Discursive pragmatics of T-shirt inscriptions

Constructing the self, context and social aspirations

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This study adopts a discourse-pragmatic analytical approach to examine the various ways youths construct themselves and their group identities, their environment and socio-economic aspirations using T-shirt messages and slogans. Two institutions of higher learning in Nigeria are examined. Findings show that T-shirts combine fashion and youth popular culture with need and identity negotiation. The youth not only assert who they are and what they wish to be known for, but also express their aspirations for a better socio-economic and political society. The needs for love and money are particularly stressed. The study also describes the linguistic structures and style of T-shirt messages.

Keywords: T-shirts, discourse, pragmatics, messages, slogans, politics, society, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The term 'discursive pragmatics' has been used to mean 'the platform for the pragmatic study of discourse' (Zienkowski 2011); and in the current study, we use it to represent the combination of pragmatic and discourse analytical approaches. While pragmatics and discourse analysis have the same interest in the studies of real-life discourses described in terms of observable language use, pragmatic concerns are related to 'functional and communicative use of language conceived in terms of interactional processes and context generation' (Zienkowski 2011: 1). Kasper (2006) has also viewed discursive pragmatics as the application of conversational analysis to the study of speech acts, where 'discursive pragmatics' represents the view that 'meaning and action are constituted not only *in* but *through* social interaction' (p. 285). In the present study we view discourse as meaning and socio-cultural action performed through the language use of written or printed texts, and argue that messages printed on T-shirts are forms of 'pragmatic acts'

(Mey 2001) by which Nigerian youths construct their environment and social aspirations. According to Mey (2001), 'pragmatic acting can be considered as adapting oneself linguistically and otherwise to one's world,' and 'all our acting is done in that world and within the affordances it puts at our disposal' (p. 215). While performing pragmatic/discursive acts by means of printed messages, such as dissociating themselves from certain political group ideologies, the wearers of some types of T-shirts also construct for themselves particular identities. Hence, we apply the appraisal framework to show that T-shirt wearers take some stances and discursively construct for themselves particular identities by which they position themselves and the Nigerian society they address. This article therefore attempts to provide answers to the following questions: (1) how do Nigerian youths position themselves in the kind of T-shirt messages they wear as members of the Nigerian society? (2) What particular identities do they construct for themselves? (3) how do they represent their environment and needs? (4) What socio-cultural and political future do they look forward to and what social actions (or acts) do they perform while doing so?

2. T-shirt inscriptions

According to Barthes (2006), individuals, particularly young people in society, have shown that there is a difference between dress and dressing. While dressing is the actual act of putting on some specific items of clothes, a dress is a system of shared meaning evoked by elements of clothing and rules governing the allowed combinations. T-shirt inscriptions/messages on the other hand, mediate between fashion and social discourse, revealing that T-shirt messages are much more than just putting on clothes. A T-shirt demonstrates that fashion indeed can speak.

A T-shirt is a slim, soft item of clothing, which is traditionally worn as an undergarment or worn as a summer wear; it is also quite suitable for menial outdoor works, chores and sports. In modern times however, the T-shirt has become "one of fashion's basic items" that "captures the pulse of the time" (Critchell 2013: 1); it is especially popular with teenagers and young adults. T-shirts are available in different sizes, styles and designs for men, women and young children. Some T-shirts are also worn by animals (e.g. dogs).

Not only are T-shirts trendy fashion wears, they are also (more importantly) a medium for individual and group self expression, reflecting values, affiliations, expectations and aspirations. Since T-shirts ceased to be worn as mere undergarments in modern times, T-shirts with popular designer name logos have become popular culture items with the youth. T-shirts bearing messages, company logos, designs and slogans have been used as political/religious and advertising

campaigns. Hence, messages with different topics on politics, business, environment and religion, among others are clearly displayed on T-shirts. Protesters and activists also utilize this medium to voice their messages or grievances. In Nigeria for example, a women group organized a protest against a N4 billion budget allocation for the First Lady's Mission House at Abuja; the T-shirt the protesters wore read: 'N4B will create plenty jobs, no to mission house; budgetary allocation? Be patient till you are elected!' (Shiyanbola 2013).¹ Similarly, the recent *#BringBackOurGirls* protesters, in addition to their campaign on Twitter, calling for the release of 276 schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram terrorists at Chibok in northeast Nigeria on the 14th of April, 2014, often wear the *#BringBackOurGirls* T-shirts. A good number of celebrities have also used T-shirts to promote their brands and popularity. Their fans and supporters would wear their celebrities' T-shirts as a form of social identification. And as a form of hero worship, some T-shirt wearers would don T-shirts that not only display slogans but also graphic representations or photos of their heroes such as musicians, movie stars, athletes etc.

In Africa, T-shirts are worn all year round, unlike in temperate regions of the world, where they are worn mostly during the summer. But even in temperate regions, T-shirts with slogans that represent individual and group ideologies are worn during winter as an undergarment. Whenever situations call for their exposure, the wearers simply pull off their jackets to expose the message on their T-shirts. An example is what some footballers do when they score goals. Mario Ballotelli (an Italian national football team striker) wears an under T-shirt that reads: 'why always me?' Ricardo Kaka (a Brazilian one time FIFA footballer of the year) also wears a T-shirt that says: 'I can do all things through Christ.' According to Critchell (2013), youths practically 'live' in T-shirts.

While some T-shirt messages are comical and humorous, some others can be offensive, shocking, and pornographic. Hence, some T-shirt messages have been criticized for containing sexist and harmful comments. An example was reported by a New York newsletter where parents had forced a children's designer shop to discontinue ordering girls' T-shirts. The parents had complained that some T-shirt messages suggested that girls cannot excel in Math (see <http://newyork.cbs/local.com/2013/08/07/experts-discontinued-t-shirt-sent-harmful-message-to-girls/>). Nevertheless, T-shirts are unmistakably a fashion-oriented medium that "allows kids to send a message without taking a fashion risk" (Critchell 2013: 1). Some political and social slogans that T-shirts often display have come to mirror the various concerns of the modern world; which is one of the reasons that they have so profoundly permeated different levels of culture and society.

1. Editor's note. 'N' stands for 'Nigerian Naira' (NGN). As of July 2016, NGN 1,000 stood at USD 3.52.

3. Literature review

Literature on T-shirt inscriptions and messages is not common. A few works on T-shirts (from disciplines other than linguistics) have only examined T-shirt designs and social functions as items of fashion. Miller (2002) for instance, argues that T-shirts produced by the fans of the *Phish Rock Band* feature borrowed and re-contextualized images, and function as an expression of affiliation and affection for the Phish band. Kelly (2003) examines image projection and expression of identity through T-shirts in Hawaii. Her study argues that there is a casual self-image depicted by T-shirt wearers, as well as a depiction of imagery on the T-shirts. The study concludes that T-shirt images are pertinent to the four major markets in Hawaii (i.e. local, native Hawaiian, surfer, and tourist), and are intentionally worn to function as badges of social identity and expressions of political loyalty. Glass (2008) draws anthropological attention to the representative function of T-shirt souvenirs in the mediation of social relations. The study observes that the T-shirts are produced as gifts and souvenirs to remember local events, and also to flexibly identify social groups within communities in British Columbia. A sociolinguistic study carried out by Barbara Johnstone suggests that Pittsburghese T-shirts are indicative of the existence of a Pittsburgh dialect in Pennsylvania (Johnstone 2009). The study argues that Pittsburghese shirts are produced, circulated and consumed with intent, which has contributed “to dialect enregisterment in at least four ways: i.e. they put local speech on display; they imbue local speech with value; they standardize local speech, and they link local speech with particular social meanings” (p. 157). Penny (2009) argues that the use of political T-shirts in the American 2008 presidential campaigns was a powerful and important medium of communication; though its exact role was ambiguous, the medium would continue to remain a key feature of American political and cultural life. Similarly, Ghilani (2010), examining the use of T-shirts as a type of propaganda to promote the contributions of women in post-war America, argues that T-shirts like posters with images of women heroes have continued to recruit female audiences.

Adrover (2013) examines the corporate logo (chiefly image) T-shirts in Ghana. The study posits that T-shirts worn during the annual *Fetu Afahye* festival in Ghana are functional discourses. While the corporate logo T-shirts are part of the marketing strategy of companies that sponsor the festival, when they are worn by chiefs, T-shirts are a means of brand promotion and are used to nurture friendship and explore possibilities of future support from the sponsors. However, the presence of T-shirts branded with a chief’s photograph is suggestive of an assertion of political authority, and this serves as “a medium to resist sponsor

impositions and re-inscribe the space of the festival with distinctive forms of political affiliations” (p. 58).

While most of the studies reviewed above focused on multimodal aspects of T-shirts such as images and graphic forms and (in some cases) economic uses, studies that examine the discursive content of T-shirt messages are almost non-existent, especially as it relates to the Nigerian society. However, among works on discourse types that are structurally related to T-shirt inscriptions are those of graffiti and bumper stickers (see Nwoye 1993; Ferrell 1995; Chiluiwa 2008). What all of these have in common is that they are printed on some surface; the messages printed on them are generally brief and incisive, and target particular audiences. Their messages are also used to address different topics that relate to social and cultural practices (Salamon 2001), as well as express emotions (Newhagen & Ancell 1995). But unlike bumper/vehicle stickers, T-shirts are more in use by youths and teenagers; besides, T-shirts are often accompanied by graphic arts or photos. Unlike graffiti, T-shirts are mobile and dynamic. Compared with graffiti and stickers, T-shirts are more vibrant and sensational; they are controlled by fashion and more amenable to social and cultural change. T-shirt messages may be found and read anywhere human beings are found, because they are not restricted to any particular space, time or location like other types of messages. Those wearing T-shirts with messages are like walking graffiti, communicating different messages about human social concerns. Figures 1 and 2 are examples from the data.

The present study aims at analyzing the different discursive contents of T-shirt slogans and messages, particularly those that relate to individual and

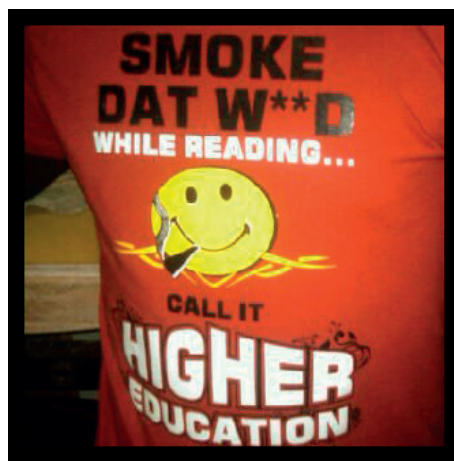


Figure 1. Message: ‘smoke dat w**d (weed) while reading ... call it higher education’



Figure 2. Message: ‘Shame on you girls! I’m still single’

group identities, social and cultural environments, and individual or group aspirations. Hence, the study will examine the linguistic and discourse structures of T-shirt slogans and messages; due to its focus on message content, it will not analyze other semiotic aspects (e.g. colours, graphic symbols etc), as a few other studies have done.

4. Theoretical framework

We apply the appraisal framework to examine the various stances and evaluations in language that the Nigerian youth carry out through the messages of the T-shirts they wear. Appraisal is a framework for the systematic analysis of evaluation and stance as they operate in texts or group of texts (Martin 2000; White 2011). It focuses on the social function of language use expressed in texts, not only as a means through which speakers/writers express their feelings and take stances, but also “engage with socially-determined value positions and thereby align or dis-align themselves with the social subjects who hold to these positions” (White 2011: 14). This framework stems from systemic functional linguistics (SFL), which views language in terms of its social functions. These functions are of three types, namely; the ideational (represents the world of experience), the interpersonal (constructs social roles, relationships and identities), and the textual (constructs language as coherent texts in relation to their social contexts; see Halliday 1994). SFL offers a comprehensive view of evaluative resources, including instances of attitude and positioning and the sources of these evaluative

stances in discourse (Pascual & Unger 2010). Within the interpersonal function, the appraisal framework shows how writers construct for themselves particular identities in relationship to other members of the society or social groups. Hence, appraisal is defined as "...the semantic resources used to negotiate emotions, judgement and valuations, alongside resources for amplifying and engaging with these evaluations" (Martin 2000: 145).

The theory of appraisal proposes three systems – *Attitude*, *Engagement*, and *Graduation*. Attitude refers to feelings, including emotional reactions, judgements of behaviour and evaluation of things (Martin & White 2005). This system is also divided into three categories namely: *Affect*, *Judgement*, and *Appreciation*. Affect is the "resources for expressing feelings," while judgement is the "resources for judging character." Appreciation refers to "resources for valuing the worth of things" (Martin & Rose 2003:24). The system of *Attitude* constitutes the main resource for evaluating, adopting stances, constructing textual personas and managing interpersonal positioning and relationships. The system of *Graduation* includes the resources that either strengthen or weaken attitude. The system of *Engagement* is concerned with the sourcing of attitudes and the play of voices around opinions in discourse. This system covers all the resources that the language offers for speakers to express their interpersonal positionings in the texts they produce (White 2011; Pascual & Unger 2010).

5. Methodology

The data for this study comprise one hundred (100) T-shirt slogans and messages collected from the University of Lagos (Unilag) and Yaba College of Technology (Yabatech), also located in Lagos (Nigeria). Fifty-six (56) samples were obtained from Unilag, while forty-four (44) were obtained from Yabatech. The two institutions were purposively selected, since they are viewed as representing the hub of fashion in Nigeria, being located at Nigeria's commercial capital. Also, the two institutions' student population is among the highest in the country, with students from almost all ethnic groups; there are also hundreds of international students. Most importantly, unlike some private and mission-based universities in Nigeria, the two institutions do not place any restrictions on dressing. (In many private universities, T-shirts are not allowed on campus, especially during lecture hours). These public institutions provide a context where T-shirts are used to portray a sense of nationality and to express both social and emotional sensitivity. In general, students in institutions of higher learning are socially sensitive, and are often associated with radical thinking, usually expressed through language and other semiotic means.

The data were collected between May and August, 2012 at the campuses of the two institutions mentioned. Research assistants personally met with T-shirt wearers and sought their permission to copy out the messages on their T-shirts. In some cases, T-shirt wearers posed for photos and freely gave their permission to use them (i.e. messages on their T-shirts) for research. However, some of the youths are not really aware of the implications of messages on T-shirts, and (since T-shirt wearers do not generally print the messages themselves) some simply buy some T-shirts that represent their best colours and graphics without really being mindful of the messages on them. Our research, however, reveals that most of the T-shirt wearers are conscious of the words on their T-shirts and that they deliberately bought T-shirts that represent their thoughts and beliefs.

As highlighted above, only the messages on T-shirts are analyzed. The analytical framework here is discourse analysis (appraisal/evaluation in discourse), combined with insights from pragmatics (particularly with regard to the pragmatic acts performed by the messages). This follows the theoretical assumption that oral or written expressions do not merely provide information for the hearer or reader: they perform pragmatic acts, usually not explicitly stated, such as implicit identification with certain people, implicit expression of affection or projection of certain social roles or identities (Mey 2001). Applying the appraisal framework, we concentrate on the attitude system, focusing on *Affect*, *Judgement*, and *Appreciation*, showing some semantic domains as they operate in the discourse of T-shirt messages. For instance, judgement or appreciation can manifest as qualities (adjectives – e.g. *true African*) or processes (verbs – e.g. *my money grows as grass*).

The data are analyzed in groups according to their discursive topics. There are no particular criteria for the selection of the number of samples in each group; the number was what was available and manageable at the time of the research. Due to the limited space of this paper, only few samples are reproduced in the examples below. The data reflect messages covering various topics such as relationships, sex, marriage, money, religion, politics, etc. As a form of data description, we have grouped them into four broad topics/themes and describe their general characteristics and functions. The discursive topic groups are (i) social relationship, identity and culture; (ii) religious belief and affiliation; (iii) economic context and competition; and (iv) political aspiration and attitude. 40% of the data fall under social topics, while the rest account for 20% each. (See also Appendix, below).

5.1 Social relationship, identity and culture

This discursive group covers slogans and messages that reflect the young people's redefinition of identity, life and social values and their reaction to culture and traditional norms; their views about sex and sexuality, love and relationship and moral virtues; it is also about how they attempt to deal with competition and struggle for survival as well as their socio-cultural aspirations. Messages in this group perform social functions such as information exchange and moral advice; they also express emotions such as love and hate. Some of them are used as a form of awareness creation, keeping records of events and dates, and the encouragement of creativity and entertainment. Samples are listed below:

- (1) Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder
 - (2) I am too sexy for this shirt
 - (3) Jealousy is a disease, get well soon
 - (4) Underneath this haughtiness, I'm only human
 - (5) Be nice to fat people, one day they might save your life
 - (6) Yoruba boy, Igbo sense
 - (7) I'm a role model, depends on who is watching
 - (8) Hating me won't make you pretty
 - (9) I wish my grade will smoke weed and get high
 - (10) Make love not babies
 - (11) Someone has to spend daddy's money
 - (12) Stare if you must
 - (13) Never trust a girl
 - (14) Me and you no dey for the same category
 - (15) All rumors are true
 - (16) I'm tired of being told what to think
 - (17) True African
 - (18) Give youth a future
- etc.

5.2 Religious belief and practice

T-shirt inscriptions in this category are those that reflect religious beliefs and practices of the individual. They also suggest the individual's perception of religion and spirituality. Under the religious category, the messages reflect both the Christian and Muslim faith, the two main religions in Nigeria (see Chiluya 2008). Below are a few samples of the data:

- (1) My God is not on twitter yet he has many followers
 - (2) If God be for me, who can be against me
 - (3) The Lord is my shepherd
 - (4) Allah is the way
 - (5) Covenant men of souls ministry
 - (6) I am a son of David Oyedepo
 - (7) God is able
 - (8) Sango no fit face my God
 - (9) 1cross + 2nails = 4given
 - (10) Allah has set me free
 - (11) I'm God's masterpiece
- etc.

5.3 Economic context and competition

T-shirt inscriptions in this group seem to reveal the economic situation of the country as well as reflect the economic system of production and management of material resources. They also reveal what individuals think about money and acquisition of wealth and their reactions to the prevalent economic situation of Nigeria. Some of the T-shirts represent advert messages and slogans (e.g. 'Glo... with pride,' 'Classic fitted wear,' 'Ribena blackcurrant' etc.); many of them are accompanied by company names, logos and trademarks. Some of the messages and slogans in this group are listed below:

- (1) Classic fitted wear
- (2) Fuck school, hustle hard
- (3) Stay fresh get money
- (4) Ama rep Nokia
- (5) My money grows like grass

- (6) Tom tom...soothing relief
 - (7) Money is the root of all evils
 - (8) Me I want money ooo
 - (9) Love and money
 - (10) Glo...with pride.
 - (11) Pay your tax
 - (12) Is it your money?
 - (13) 5 Alive berry blast fruit drink
 - (14) Christiana Fabre
 - (15) Dolce and Gabbana
 - (16) Ribena blackcurrant
- etc.

5.4 Political aspiration and attitude

Political topics in this group reflect the attitudes of the youth towards the Nigerian political system. Some of the messages are skeptical of Nigeria's democracy; some contain outright condemnation of corruption in government. However, while some T-shirt messages mirror some sense of commitment and dedication to some political ideals, others are merely criticizing. Examples from the data are listed below:

- (1) Government must obey
- (2) Is this democracy?
- (3) Vote them out
- (4) The system is weak, we are the strong ones
- (5) I want change
- (6) Rule of law
- (7) Kill corruption not Nigerians
- (8) Power for the people
- (9) We want free and fair election
- (10) 2011 election will be credible
- (11) Divide the national Moi-Moi, share the national cake
- (12) I believe in democracy

- (13) People oriented leadership
- (14) Lawlessness and anarchy
- (15) President Jonathan leads
- etc.

T-shirt messages appear not particularly unique to fashion or T-shirts. Many of the messages are familiar social slogans, clichés, and traditional sayings. This suggests that the T-shirt designers and message writers might have culled many of the messages from familiar sources like the Bible, famous quotes, literary works, the mass media or the Internet. For example, ‘beauty is in the eyes of the beholder,’ ‘capitalism,’ or ‘the Lord is my Shepherd,’ are certainly not unique to T-shirts or a fashion outlet and have been used in different types of contexts. What T-shirt message writers have done is to re-contextualize these messages for their new audiences in an inter-textual blend of fashion and discourse of youth identity and juvenile self-definition. The audience for the messages is everyone who cares to read them and not just the youth. The political messages are probably directed to public office holders; unfortunately, however, the latter generally hardly notice them.

The T-shirt messages in the data appear as phrases and clauses. Most are written in English, while few are written in the local pidgin. The form, structure and style of T-shirts in the data are discussed in the following.

6. Linguistic forms and style of T-shirt messages

‘Linguistic structures’ under this subheading represents grammatical forms as well as language strategies (examples are the use of loan words and the Nigerian pidgin).

6.1 Grammatical structures

T-shirt inscriptions may contain just one word with accompanying graphic art. But the data for this study shows that the messages are mainly phrases and clauses (or simple sentences). Slogans are often structured as noun phrases e.g. *rule of law, love and money, true African* etc. Most of these fall under the business topic category. This is to be expected because business and political messages are often incisive and structured to persuade or influence. The religious and social messages are more explanatory, and frequently occur as simple phrases or sentences. Religious messages, for instance, make claims and assertions such as ‘Allah has set me free,’ or ‘I am God’s masterpiece’; hence they are bound to be expressive

and written as full sentences. Some of the slogans and messages are verb phrases such as those that make imperative statements like ‘vote them out’ or ‘... divide the national cake’, etc. The least frequent sentence structures are interrogatives. And when they are used, they are not addressed to anyone in particular. They are more like rhetorical questions (e.g. ‘Is it your money?’ ‘Is this democracy?’). These questions reflect bitterness, anger or frustration. ‘Is this your money’ represents actually an emerging discursive resistance to political corruption in Nigeria among the youth (the question actually addresses politicians who have often been accused of looting the national treasury). The study shows that declarative statements occur more frequently in the data than do imperative and interrogative statements. This implies that the T-shirt wearers (like wearers of graffiti) have a strong need to express themselves aggressively or powerfully (Nwoye 1993), and find in the T-shirt the medium to do so.

6.2 Use of loan words

Since the language of the T-shirts is English, ‘loan words’ in this context stand for ‘words other than English’. They occur in T-shirt messages to express words or ideas that lack English equivalents, like proper names such as names for God or a deity e.g. ‘Allah,’ ‘Sango’; names of individuals e.g. ‘David Oyedepo’; names of ethnic groups, e.g. ‘Yoruba,’ ‘Igbo,’ and the name of a local food, e.g. ‘moi-moi.’ All these give the messages a contextual and cultural flavour. It also shows that not all of the T-shirts were produced abroad and imported to Africa. Many of the T-shirt messages (especially in the political and religious category) are produced locally and for local consumption.

6.3 Nigerian Pidgin in T-shirt messages

The Nigerian Pidgin serves as a neutral language among the over 450 ethnic groups in Nigeria and is more widely spoken than the standard Nigerian English. In some cases, it is the mother tongue for some communities and towns in the country (Ofulue 2004). It is also popular in advertising, entertainment, music, literature and online forums hosted by Nigerians (Chiluiwa 2013b). According to Ajibade et al. (2012), the Nigerian Pidgin is more popular with the youth than with older adults. Generally, the Nigerian Pidgin is easier to learn and use than Standard English and is the preferred language in intercultural communication, after the local languages. It is therefore not surprising that some T-shirt messages appear in the Nigerian Pidgin. Some examples in the data are shown below:

- (1) You too dey bless me oo (*You too bless me*)
- (2) reduce my wahala (*reduce my trouble*)
- (3) Me I want money ooo
- (4) U know say money no be problem (*you know money is not the problem*)
- (5) Me and you no dey for the same category (*You and I are not in the same social category*)

The Nigerian Pidgin is employed in most cases in informal situations; it is often used to ‘crack’ jokes. Thus, it functions as a symbol of comradeship and collective consciousness. The messages above express desires, and are actually appeals (as in examples (2) and (3)). On the surface, example (4) sounds ironical but in actual fact, there are youths whose problem is not money. These belong to a social class of young people who became rich very early, and whose source of wealth is unknown. Some of them are often viewed as the children of political office holders, even though this may not be true.

6.4 Style of T-shirt messages

The style of T-shirt messages is somewhat similar to the language style of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), which according to Crystal (2011) combines features of speech exchange and written communication. For instance, some of the words and constructions are characteristic of short forms (e.g. ‘Ama rep Nokia’ or ‘U know say...’); numeric figures (e.g. ‘5 Alive berry...’ or ‘1cross+2nails = 4given’) as well as correct simple sentences. Some of the messages are slang (e.g. ‘I got Jesus swag’). An interesting equation of the Christian ‘salvation message’ is given as ‘1cross (one cross) + 2nails (the two nails of Christ in his crucifixion) = 4given (equals forgiven; i.e. the crucifixion of Jesus Christ secures forgiveness). This is the type of linguistic creativity that is common on *Facebook*, *Twitter*, in text messages and online forums. Again, this is not surprising, since the creative use of language in CMC and that of fashion discourse (e.g. T-shirt inscriptions) are associated with the same people (i.e. the youth).

7. Analysis and discussion

In the analysis, we examine how the discursive contents of the T-shirt messages construct the individual self and group identities, political questions of freedom, and the young people’s aspirations that touch on social and economic needs. It

also shows how these contents are reflected in the pragmatic acts performed by the messages.

7.1 Discourse of identity and self awareness

An identity derives from an individual's self awareness and perception of who he/she is (or should be). According to Tajfel (1981: 255, cited in De Fina 2006: 355), identity is "that part of an individual's self concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with a value and emotional significance attached to that membership." However, people's commitment to social or ethnic groups and the meaning they attach to social categories change through time and in accordance with unique social contexts (De Fina 2006). Thus, identities are progressive, and change according to how individuals perceive themselves or in response to their degrees of self-awareness in time and space. In other words, an identity is not a fixed or finished product; rather, it is constructed or deconstructed; produced by, and often imposed on individuals through dominant discourse practices and ideologies (Georgakopoulou 2002; De Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg 2006).

In all the T-shirt discourse topic groups identified above, there is the constant negotiation of individual and group identities with the society, involving the perception of how to survive and what an average youth perceives a normal society should offer. The struggle for identity is common with youths especially as they are often very conscious of what people think about them. So they tend to form identities for themselves and dress in a particular way either to conform to certain rules of fashion or simply to 'belong.' Some believe that their dressing (sometimes made of assorted T-shirts) will boost their self esteem and attract friends. In the social inscription discourse topic group for example, some messages such as:

- (1) *Stare* if you must
- (2) *Hating* me won't make you pretty
- (3) *Sorry* I'm *straight* like the BRT lane
- (4) Pretty girls *turn* heads, I *break* necks
- (5) Me and you no dey for the same category
- (6) I'm *tired* of being told what to think

exemplify individual self assertions – who they are, what they are capable of and what they should be taken for. And this is done with some expression of affect in example (3) (I am) *sorry* I'm *straight* like the BRT lane...' (the 'BRT lane' is a straight motor lane used mainly by the Lagos State commuter buses. It is a traffic

offence for private cars to run in them; BRT lanes are usually straight and long). However, to be 'straight' in Nigeria (and not only in Nigeria) is a metaphor for hetero-oriented sexuality. Thus, in constructing an identity for him/herself, the wearer pragmatically dissociates himself/herself from homosexuality (the attitude of dissociating from homosexual behaviour became common in Nigeria after the passing of the Nigerian anti-gay law, which prescribes a 14-year jail term for same-sex couples if convicted). Moreover, an individual comparing him or herself to a BRT lane suggests that the wearer is insensitive to, or just does not care about people's opinions, actions or feelings towards him or her. So, 'loving or hating' him/her (as in example (2) above) changes nothing. This appears to be a dominant attitude of youths who have to confront social practices and cultural status quos that do not represent what a modern average youth expects of a modern lifestyle. For example, cultural norms that prescribe how to dress, how to greet, who to marry etc., are unpopular with youths of nowadays. And in most cases they rebel and tend to condemn indigenous tradition or religious opinion about their kind of dressing or lifestyle. By saying: 'stare if you must', as in example (1) above, they perform a directive act of command. In 'I'm *tired* of being told what to do' (in example (6) above and Figure 3), the wearer expresses the feeling of frustration and unhappiness.

Interestingly, some of the T-shirts are actually imported from Western countries; the messages on some of them tend to negate typical African traditional beliefs and values and are thus sometimes viewed as having a bad influence on the youths that wear them. From the messages analyzed above, it is clear therefore that T-shirt inscriptions do not merely inform or state the obvious; they also reveal attitudes, identities (as in examples (3), (4) & (6)) and aspirations and perform the various speech acts proposed by Searle (1969) such as *directive* (i.e. ordering e.g.

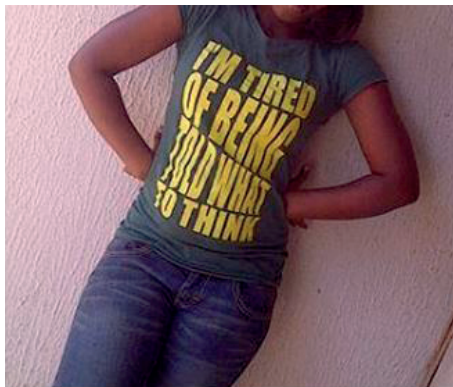


Figure 3. Message: 'I'm tired of being told what to think'

'stare if you must'); others are stating resolutions or the state of mind of, alternatively claiming or reporting decisions by, the wearers (e.g. example (4) & (5)).

In both the religious and political inscriptions, youths construct themselves in relation to their beliefs and affiliations and reflect their emotions and judgements in relation to their social situation. Messages like the earlier quoted 'I am a son of David Oyedepo,' 'I'm God's *masterpiece*' (self-appreciation in relation to God), or 'I *believe* in democracy' are good examples that stress religious sensitivity and political perception. Interestingly, example (6) (in Section 5.2, of the religious category) is not only a religious identification with a religion but also mirrors material sensitivity. David Oyedepo is a well known, pragmatic pastor of the *Winners Chapel International Church*, believed to be the richest clergyman in Africa. He is said to be at the forefront of the 'prosperity gospel' (see Chiluiwa 2013a). Many Christian youths in Nigeria often construct their identities around this man, not necessarily for his religious values but rather for his wealth.

In most of the samples, the pronominal 'I' and the objective 'me' feature frequently to enunciate individualism and self-perception. Construction of the self and group identities features more frequently in the social and religious inscriptions. These also reflect attitude expressed through affect, judgement and appreciation. A few examples are listed below:

- (1) Yoruba boy, Igbo sense (*negative judgement*)
- (2) If you are not from Imo, forget it (*positive judgement of being an Igbo*)
- (3) *True African* (*positive judgement*)
- (4) *Truly redeemed* (*positive judgement*)
- (5) Allah is the way (*positive judgement*)
- (6) Covenant men of souls ministry (*positive judgement*)
- (7) Sango no fit face my God (*positive judgement*)

The above examples reflect group and ethnic positive constructions. Ethnic superiority and fear of dominion are regular socio-cultural issues that pervade social and media discourses in Nigeria. They have not only generated ethnic hatred, but have resulted in sectarian and religious crises in the past. For instance, the Igbo of the southeast of Nigeria are generally associated with very high intelligence (though often constructed negatively as being crafty or fraudulent). Compared with the Yoruba of the southwest, Igbos are said to be more sensible, enterprising and business oriented (Uwalaka 2003), whereas the Yoruba are viewed as tribalistic, lazy and sycophantic. To survive in Nigeria however, one is required to possess the intelligence of the Igbo and the survival abilities of the Yoruba. The T-shirt wearer, while appearing neutral, still constructs the usual ethnic sentiment. Thus,

example (2) says: ‘if you are not from Imo, forget it’, reflecting a negative evaluation of the ‘other’ while passing a positive judgement on being an Igbo (Imo is an Igbo state of Nigeria). Similarly, the usual religious tension and the drive to propagate Christianity, preferring it to Islam (and vice versa) have always permeated social discourses and practices in Nigeria (see Chiluiwa 2008). T-shirt messages are not left out. Examples (4), (5) and (6) above reflect both Christian and Muslim voices asserting their group beliefs as well as constructing their identification with these religions. Interestingly, example (7) is a Christian voice asserting the superiority of Christianity over the African traditional religion, again reflecting a positive judgement in accordance with some established Christian standards and beliefs (‘Sango’, the Yoruba ‘god of thunder’, represents traditional worship, while ‘covenant men of soul ministry’ represents the Christian religion). Messages like the above (written in the local pidgin) often breed discontent between the two religions. African traditional religion however, has lost most of its adherents to Christianity in modern times (see Chiluiwa 2013a).

While constructing their social perceptions and identities, youths are both highly conscious of their looks and their body shape, which are believed to complement fashion. As a matter of fact, people with certain body shapes are constructed in terms of a particular ‘low’ social group. This is clearly illustrated in example (5) (of the social relationship category) that says: ‘be nice to fat people, one day they might save your life.’ A negative attitude is reflected here in stressing ‘fat’, *fat* being a reflection of negative judgement. Here, ‘fat people’ are being assigned an identity, one which of course is different from the one they assume for themselves. This also tends to reveal the meaning of ‘true Africa’ in example (3) above, where a *true* African is defined in terms of physical beauty, like those exhibited by South African models with slim bodies, long straight legs, narrow hips, flat bellies etc. T-shirts with this type of message usually carry along with it the photo of a model that represents a ‘true African’, re-echoing the traditional slogan: ‘black is beautiful.’ This kind of evaluation not only reflects positive judgement but also appreciation.

7.2 Discourse and the sociopolitical context

The messages in this group reveal responses and reactions, expressed both explicitly and implicitly, to the social and political context of Nigeria. One way the youth have done this on T-shirts is by attempting to assume a responsibility towards solving some perceived social and political problems; hence, the messages are didactic such as advising against jealousy, or improper family planning, advising on the right person to trust, and so on. Example (2) below, for instance, is a

possible response to the debate on population control in Nigeria. Despite a population of over 160 million people (in 2011) with an annual growth rate of 2.5%, there is no direct policy on population control. Hence, the T-shirt message saying: 'make love, not babies' performs a directive act of ordering. Other directive/pragmatic acts of advising in this category include 'vote them out,' 'kill corruption not Nigerians' etc. These pragmatic acts, as evaluations of the Nigerian situations, are responses to sociopolitical problems. In some cases, the T-shirt wearers take a stance and disalign themselves from the political system. In example (4) for example, the message reflects a type of *booster* (Hyland 2005) to express certainty, commitment and solidarity with the reader when it says: 'government *must* obey.'

- (1) I'm a role model, depends on who is watching
- (2) *Make* love not babies
- (3) *Never trust* a girl
- (4) Government *must* obey
- (5) *Vote* them out
- (6) Rule of law
- (7) *Kill* corruption not Nigerians
- (8) Power for the people
- (9) People oriented leadership

Generally, political slogans in the data reflect reactions to Nigeria's money politics and system of administration, which have often been criticized in the media and the Internet (see Ifukor 2010). Nigeria's economic challenges have been attributed to poor leadership, corruption and poor management of public funds. The government has at various times been accused of violations of fundamental human rights and the rule of law, and harassment of journalists and civil rights groups. Moreover, Nigeria's democracy has been fraught with electoral fraud, with reports of violence across the country. Some various forms of political conflicts have also resulted in some high profile killings. Surprisingly, social crises and civil unrests, resulting in the loss of lives and property, seem to have taken an unprecedented dimension since May 29, 1999, when Nigeria returned to civil rule (Adesoji & Alao 2009; Chiluiwa 2011a, 2012). This provides the context in which the political T-shirt messages were written and the problems they appear to respond to.

As noted above, some of the slogans are peremptory and authoritative (e.g., (2), (5), (7)); some make claims, condemn, scold, or report. Thus, they perform some discursive pragmatic acts (Mey 2001) such as representative, expressive and commissive: e.g., 'government *must* obey' (the constitution); 'power for the people,' and 'rule of law.' Others like 'vote them out' or 'kill corruption, not Nigerians'

are more like orders directed to the electorate as well as the government. Most of the messages, while performing these pragmatic acts, also reflect negative evaluation of the Nigerian government. Some obvious implied meanings of the messages are that power has been taken from the people; people are being killed (either directly by accidental police discharges or indirectly by hunger), rather than is corruption; some constitutional provisions that protect the rights of the people have been undermined by the government, and the political leadership in Nigeria has not been accountable to the people.

Even so, it is not altogether true that the Goodluck Jonathan administration (the Nigerian government preceding the current one, Jonathan having served as Nigeria's 14th president) has performed poorly throughout. Apart from one of the messages, apparently from one of Jonathan's supporters that says: 'Jonathan leads,' all other T-shirt political messages critique the government. This is perhaps due to the fact that some of the messages were written before Jonathan came to power, and actually address past governments. According to World Bank statistics (2012), Nigeria's GDP rose from \$498 million in 2002 to \$262.2 billion in 2012, with \$1,430 income per capita. The rate of inflation declined from 12% in 1999 to 8.7% in first quarter of 2013 (*BusinessDay*, August 20, 2013). Unemployment however rose from 4.9% in 2007 to 21% in 2011 (*CIA World Factbook*). In a recent report (see BBC April 4, 2014), Nigeria ranks as the largest economy in Africa with a GDP of \$509.9 billion as of the end of 2013, overtaking South Africa with \$370.3 billion. This shows that some of the challenges reflected in the T-shirts are a bit exaggerated, since these T-shirts messages were written before the current economic growth in Nigeria. But also, it is still true, unfortunately, that Nigeria's growing economy is hardly reflected in the living standards of the citizens, especially in the face of unemployment still on the increase.

7.3 Discourse of needs and aspirations

Some of the messages in all of the topics examined above express the needs and aspirations of the T-shirt wearers; when some of these needs are met, the wearers also communicate them. For example, the message on Figure 4 is 'we found love'; the photo shows a young couple in each other's arms. Interestingly, many of the needs and aspirations expressed in the social inscription group is that of love and relationship. Some of the messages are actually confessions of love to friends, while some express admiration of Love as a sentiment. At this point of their lives, youths are generally highly sensitive to love and sex and they express this through T-shirt messages. In terms of pragmatic acts, messages in this group are mostly expressive (i.e. acts of appreciating – e.g. 'you look hotter online'); representative (act of asserting, claiming – e.g. 'me I want money') and commissive



Figure 4. Message: 'we found love'

(betting, vowing, and promising). In terms of evaluation (of attitude), the T-shirts express affect (or emotion), positive judgement of oneself, or that of a boyfriend/girlfriend (e.g. *you look hotter online*).

Some of the examples in the groups are repeated below:

- (1) I can't stop *loving* you and I can't stop *hunting* you (*affect*)
- (2) Everybody *needs* somebody to love (*affect*)
- (3) You look hotter online (*positive judgement/affect*)
- (4) I am *too sexy* for this shirt (*positive judgement/affect*)
- (5) Fuck school, hustle hard (*negative judgement of school*)
- (6) Stay fresh *get* money (*directive act, positive judgement about money*)
- (7) Me I *want* money ooo (*representative act, expressing need*)
- (8) Love and money (*representative act, indirectly expressing need*)
- (9) Is it your money? (*questioning, reflecting negative judgement about stealing*)
- (10) Someone *has to spend* daddy's money (*representative act of asserting*)
- (11) I *need* change (*representative act, expressing need*)
- (12) *Give* youth a future (*directive act*)
- (13) *Divide* the national moi-moi (*directive act, expressing need*)

Interestingly, this study shows that the needs and aspirations of youths as expressed in the T-shirt messages are more of a social and economic nature – basically concerning love and money. This need is captured as a slogan in example (8) above. Money is central and the messages and slogans also express attitudes towards money and how to make it. Some of messages sound funny like: 'someone

has to spend daddy's money,' but it reflects the widespread idea about the African traditional inheritance syndrome. It also reveals the dependency attitude of some young people who tend to rely on their fathers' wealth and refuse to work or develop a career. Unfortunately, this is supported by the indigenous culture, where the first child in a family has the right to the larger share of his father's wealth when the father dies. This practice has generated serious family disputes, many resulting in hatred, violence and death among family members. Also, Nigeria's economic problems have driven many youths to the sole pursuit of money, with a number of them engaging in fraudulent practices in order to acquire wealth. In extreme cases, the craving for money has driven some youths out of school, since education is viewed as a slow route to wealth. Example (5) above reflects the attitude of some Nigerian youths (i.e. 'fuck school, hustle hard'), which is a slogan that rules many university campuses. For others, it is suffering that has driven them out of school in search of money.

In Nigeria, like many other places, money controls politics and government; political office holders amass wealth and enrich themselves with tax payers' money. Hence, the question 'is it your money?' in (9) reflects a negative evaluation of the attitude of Nigerian politicians. In churches, the 'prosperity gospel' commands greater attendance; in social circles, who matters is who displays the greatest opulence. So, one of the T-shirts messages exclaims: 'me, I want money ooo' (notice the stress on money with the additional 'ooo'). Thus, the 'future' being demanded in example (12) is not only a political future but more like an economic future, represented by access to public funds. Example (13) above for example says: 'divide the national *moi moi*, share the national cake.' 'Moi-moi' is bean cake, also referred to as 'national cake,' which is a metaphor for Nigeria's oil wealth. The latter has generated some serious controversies over who controls what, especially in the Niger Delta region. In the recent past, ethnic militia groups had alleged the marginalization of the minority groups in the Niger Delta, whose 'right' (they claim) it was to control the 'oil money'. The Nigerian government was accused of enriching themselves at the expense of other parts of Nigeria 'who produce nothing'; thus, the sharing of the 'national cake' had been lopsided. This was the cause of the protracted armed resistance of the Niger Delta youths (see Nkolika 2007; Chiluba 2011b). It is not surprising therefore that the T-shirt messages re-echo these events.

As pointed out above, money appears to have taken the central stage in controlling people's response to the society. Even in the contests for love, money is viewed as possessing greater power. The tension between love and money ('who wins?') has formed the main theme of many movies in Nigeria's Nollywood. Many of the arguments have been that money is the wheel on which love rides. Thus, the messages such as 'me I want money,' 'is it your money?,' 'I need change,' 'give youth

a future,' 'divide the national moi-moi,' are the various discursive ways youths deconstruct a condition of deprivation, and protest against an identity that is inferior to that of those who wield political and economic power. At the same time, the slogans reflect a negative judgement of the Nigerian society; the youthful T-shirt wearers pragmatically dissociate themselves from the political system that lacks accountability to its people.

8. Conclusion

We conclude that T-shirt messages are a communication platform for sociopolitical and cultural discourses that mirror the quest for relationships and economic survival. We have endeavoured to show that the language of evaluation in T-shirt messages reflects attitudes that reveal various degrees of affect and judgement. Thus, they express a negative judgement of the Nigerian political and economic life. Then, affect is mostly expressed towards the wearer's boyfriend/girlfriend. T-shirt wearers also position themselves as Nigerians that deserve a better life – who ought to have a voice in deciding the culture they want to practice. Using several speech and pragmatic acts, as well as appraisal strategies, they construct for themselves the identity of the deprived, in need of money and love. Thus, in some of the messages, there are voices of anger, frustration, and revolt to some cultural practices. The Nigerian youths pragmatically dissociate themselves from the Nigerian government, whose actions they evaluate negatively. Many of the youths find solace in religion, with whose leaders many associate themselves, seeing them as their heroes. While the Nigerian environment is constructed as insensitive to their needs, the T-shirt wearers look forward to a better future.

Unfortunately, not much study of T-shirt inscriptions has been carried out by scholars in linguistics, semiotics, psychology, or cultural studies. We hope that our present effort will open up some more research avenues in this direction. As highlighted in the literature review, T-shirt inscriptions belong to the same genre as bumper stickers or graffiti. Although they appear to reveal nothing uniquely new in terms of message content, we argue that T-shirt messages, by combining structural features of both graffiti and bumper stickers (but with substantial additions of their own), can reveal interesting insights into how teenagers (not only in Nigeria) express emotions and judgement in relation to their environment.

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Appendix

Social

- (1) Make it happen
- (2) No one in my city has swagger like me
- (3) If you are not from Imo, forget it
- (4) You will be more interesting and I will be more interested
- (5) You looked hotter online
- (6) This shirt turns blue when I'm thinking of popcee

Religious

- (1) God of all
- (2) You too dey bless me oo
- (3) Proudly redeemed
- (4) Jesus inside
- (5) Lord bless my hustle, double my income, reduce my wahala
- (6) God knows
- (7) My God does not do drug yet he is the most high
- (8) I got Jesus swag
- (9) In God we trust
- (10) Jesus Junkie

Economic

- (1) Fuck school, ama street creed
- (2) Swag for boys, class for men
- (3) May my children never ask me where I was when others were making money
- (4) U know say money no be problem
- (5) U know say money no be problem
- (6) Capitalism
- (7) Capitalism is killing you

Political

- (1) Obey propaganda
- (2) You make plans, we make history
- (3) Sorry, the lifestyle you ordered is currently out of stock
- (4) Trust the lies not the 'truth'

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